Moscow's Choices

The McNamara visit to Vietnam, the Podgorny tour in the Middle East and the Kosygin trip to the United States reflect reappraisals by Washington and Moscow of unsuccesful military interventions abroad.

Both the Johnson and the Brezhnev-Podgorny-Kosygin administrations inherited their involvements from their predecessors. Both find their client states wanting, their own costs mounting and their ability to make efficient use of local troops waning. But each may be about to increase its commitment—more American troops for Vietnam and more Soviet arms, military advisers and economic aid for Egypt and Syria.

How much more?

The United States is more capable than the Soviet Union of producing both guns and butter. Yet Vietnam operations have already reached such a dimension that Washington is reluctant to meet General Westmoreland's troop requests, which would involve calling up reservists as a Presidential election approaches. In addition, taxes probably would have to be raised or social welfare programs further curtailed.

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Moscow's choices are even more difficult. The future growth, if any, of the civilian economy and the living standards of all Soviet citizens depend heavily on strategic and foreign policy decisions now pending and on the priorities they may impose for military research, development and output.

One decision is the rate at which the U.S.S.R. continues to expand its capability for substantial military action in the Mediterranean and further afield. The large increase in Soviet military advisers and political influence that Moscow evidently is pressing on Cairo cannot make up for the limited Soviet capability for sustained military action in that theater.

A more important decision that Moscow now faces is whether to continue to pursue parity with the United States in strategic nuclear forces or to respond to American proposals for a moratorium in offensive as well as defensive missile systems. Another series of upward spirals in the arms race could cost as much as $60 billion. A race between missile and antimissile systems could replace the present relative stability by military doctrines based on nervousness and uncertainty.

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Many of this country's leading Soviet analysts agree with Prof. Marshall D. Shulman of Columbia, writing in The New Leader, that "the Politburo has reached a time for decision" on these and related questions of world strategy. The Soviet leadership, Dr. Shulman suggests, might decide to lessen tensions with the United States and avoid a new arms race in order to concentrate resources on the domestic economy.

But dogmatic ideas and military interests may prevail in the Kremlin. Or a clear decision could be prevented by divergencies and weaknesses in leadership.

An effort by the Kremlin to muddle through with a little more intervention in the Middle East and a little more aid for North Vietnam might be combined with a gradual build-up of intercontinental missiles and antimissile systems. The result would be higher levels of tension and military expenditure that, in the end, might be almost as dangerous as a clear Soviet move to change the balance of power in the world through the missile race or a stranglehold on Europe's oil and communications in the Middle East.

The issue that confronts Moscow—and also Washington—is not whether to seek a Soviet-American "condominium" or even political harmony, but whether to engage in imaginative common action to eliminate the risk of general war.

President Johnson reportedly went far at Glassboro to indicate that such a Soviet course would find the United States responsive in arms control, trade and other fields. He undoubtedly will have to go further, particularly on Vietnam and concrete missile proposals, [illegible] Moscow's. Decisions now being made—or avoided—there could well shape the peace of the world for